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Operational Encirclement: Quick Decisive Victory or a Bridge Too Far?

A Monograph
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by MAJ Robert G. Fix, USA, 53 pages.

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This monograph examines the dynamics of operational encirclement and determines what critical factors impact success or failure in achieving decisive results. It concludes that the three most critical factors which directly impact the success or failure of an operational encirclement include: the development of a flexible campaign plan, the establishment of an efficient and effective command and control infrastructure, and an ability to properly read the events on the battlefield. Based on these factors several planning considerations are identified as useful in the planning and execution of operational encirclements.

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I. INTRODUCTION

> Total victory...is not simply a battle won, but the complete defeat of the enemy. Such a victory demands an enveloping attack...which will always make the result decisive.[1]

Although some may argue that "quick and decisive victory" as espoused in the United States Army's emerging doctrine is new, the above quote by Carl von Clausewitz indicates that total and decisive victory has always been the aim of military operations. Given the new strategic environment that the United States now finds itself, it is appropriate that the army readjusts its doctrine to fit the realities of the times. It is important to note, however that the basic premise of the United States Army has not changed: it exists to protect and defend the constitution by deterring war, and when deterrence fails, by achieving decisive victory on the battlefield.[2] Accordingly, quick and decisive operations reflect the need to achieve strategic aims before the influence of public and world opinion have an adverse impact on the military's capability to wage war.

To achieve quick and decisive victory, operational planning now takes on added significance and importance, for it is in the design of a campaign that the seeds for decisive victory are sewn. As outlined in the Army's emerging doctrine, FM 100-5 Operations, there are six operational planning fundamentals to

include: the mission, the commander's intent, estimates, concept of the operation, concepts of operational design, and the sequencing of operations.[3] Commanders and staffs use a solid analysis of their senior commander's mission, his intent, and their own estimates to formulate a well developed concept of the operation which describes how the commander expects the battle to unfold. The concept should describe a general scheme of maneuver, how the enemy is expected to react, and how each of the subordinate units' actions fit together to accomplish the mission. In developing this concept, the commander and his staff should consider those conditions which enable the operation to produce decisive results.[4] In this regards, concepts of operational design assist the commander in developing a campaign which will meet strategic aims while achieving decisive results.

More often than not, an offensive campaign must be executed to ensure decisive results are achieved since it is a well accepted principle that the offense is the more decisive form of war.[5] Ideally, offensive operations should be conducted at a high tempo and should be flexible enough to capitalize on unforeseen opportunities which may present themselves.[6] Under certain circumstances, it may even be possible to defeat an enemy force in a single offensive operation. When enemy forces are arrayed in a cordon defense, or are in a concentrated formation, large unit commanders may be presented with an opportunity to direct operations at the enemy's flank and rear

thus forcing him to abandon his position and fight at a disadvantage.[7] Attacking the enemy's flanks and rear implies operating on converging lines of operations. Converging lines, furthermore, often imply a double envelopment of enemy forces which may expose the attacking force to additional risks. Again, Clausewitz sheds insight into the dynamics of convergent attacks when he states:

> Both in strategy and in tactics, a convergent attack always hold out promise of increased results, for if it succeeds the enemy is not just beaten; he is virtually cut off. The convergent attack, then, is always the more promising; but since forces are divided and the theater enlarged, it also carries a greater risk.[8]

The natural extension of a convergent attack, or double envelopment, is the link-up of attacking forces to form an encirclement of enemy forces.[9] Encirclements can result not only from double envelopments, but can result from penetrations, turning movements, infiltrations, and single envelopments as well.[10] It is the encirclement of enemy forces that Clausewitz states provides the decisive results, yet exposes the attacking force to the greatest amount of risk. Although operational encirclements may not fit all circumstances, historical analysis suggests they can produce quick and decisive results.

But how do commanders weigh the benefits of encircling an enemy force against the risks involved? Or, as Clausewitz would ask, how does one know "whether the attacker feels strong enough

to go after such a prize?" History is replete with examples of lost opportunities to decisively defeat an enemy's army on the field of battle. All too often, tactical success has not been followed by actions to ensure operational success. This failure may be attributable to a dynamic created by the uncertainty commanders face in assessing the incremental gain of continued advance to close and link "converging" forces against the risk of surpassing the operational culminating point.

The purpose of this study is to examine the dynamics of operational encirclement and to determine what critical factors impact success or failure in achieving decisive results. To this end, the study will examine and analyze two operational encirclements conducted during the allied campaign in the European Theater of Operations during World War II. The Battles of the Falaise Gap in 1944 and the Ruhr Pocket in 1945 both illustrate the difficulties operational commanders face in assessing whether to continue pursuit and encirclement of a defeated enemy in order to achieve decisive results. Both operations will be analyzed using Cohen and Gooche's model for military failure (In the case of the Ruhr Pocket, it will be modified to present a model of success). From the analysis, the study will identify key planning considerations applicable to commanders and staffs conducting operational encirclements within the framework of today's emerging doctrine in FM 100-5, Operations.

II. The Dynamics of Operational Encirclement

> In developing his concepts, the commander should consider conditions which lead to *decisive* operations.[11]
>
> FM 100-5, Operations

To understand how encirclements may create the conditions for decisive operations, it is important to understand the basic characteristics of encirclement. As previously stated, encirclements are the result of the link-up of converging forces. Accordingly, it is fitting that the start point for this review begins with the envelopment as the basic means by which forces are committed on convergent lines.

An envelopment is defined as an offensive maneuver in which the main attack passes around or over the enemy's primary defensive positions to secure objectives to the enemy's rear.[12] Likewise, a double envelopment aims to pass around both flanks of an enemy position to attack the flanks or objectives in the enemy's rear.[13] Often times, a double envelopment is referred to as a "pincer movement.[14] There are two ways to create the conditions necessary for double envelopment. The first way is generally associated with a defending force. The center of the formation falls back to create a pocket while the wings remain static. As the enemy force continues its attack, the static wings envelop the flanks of the advancing force. The second way requires the maneuvering

force to conduct a supporting attack in the center to fix the enemy while the wings attack the flanks and rear to envelop the defenders.[15]

There are four major advantages to conducting this type of maneuver. First is the element of surprise created by the appearance of attacking forces in the rear of the enemy. Second, the enemy is prevented from reinforcing his forward units by the interdiction of his lines of communications by the enveloping wings. Third, the cost in terms of casualties to the attacking force is reduced by focusing the attack on less prepared and capable rear echelon forces. Finally, and most decisively, a double envelopment provides the opportunity to totally cutoff the retreat of enemy forces.[16]

As stated earlier, the natural conclusion of a double envelopment is a link-up of forces which, by definition, constitutes an encirclement. However, an enemy force does not have to be completely surrounded by an unbroken cordon of troops to be decisive. Under certain circumstances, it may be sufficient to interdict his lines of communication and retreat using fires and airpower alone. Although the results may not be as total, they may achieve operational results at a lesser cost in terms of casualties and resources expended. This logic is in line with Sun Tzu's theory which states that a surrounded enemy force may fight more bitterly if completely surrounded.[17] Hence, it is best to leave him an escape route - a "Golden Bridge."[18] If the terrain around a defender's perimeter is

sufficiently strong, it may be best to give a route along which he may attempt escape and along which he can be attrited by fires.[19] This in essence is one of the dilemmas facing a commander conducting a double envelopment, whether to continue pursuit and possible link-up or halt the advance and attrite by fires.

A particular risk that a commander must assess is the one his force faces from a *counter-encirclement* conducted by enemy forces outside of the pocket. As enveloping forces advance around the enemy's flank, two rings should develop. The inner ring constitutes the attacker's forces charged with holding the enemy within the pocket. In addition to this ring, the attacker must create an outer ring facing away from the encirclement to protect forces on the inner ring against enemy forces conducting a counterattack to relieve pressure on the enveloped forces. In this respect, battles of encirclement take on the characteristics of siege warfare where forces of circumvallation are positioned to keep the enemy at bay while forces of contravallation prevent relief from reaching the besieged enemy force.[20]

For the operational commander, there are two other possibilities that must be weighed in assessing the utility of attempting operational encirclement as a way for achieving quick and decisive victory. First, just as there is the potential of conducting a double envelopment along convergent lines, there is the potential in some cases to conduct a double encirclement.

In this case, a larger encirclement is conducted in conjunction with another smaller encirclement and seeks to envelop forces outside the reach of the smaller pocket. A double encirclement presents an opportunity to entrap forces in position to conduct a counter-encirclement. Secondly, vertical envelopment now provides the operational commander another way with which to cut off and block the escape of enemy forces.[21] In this sense, the affects of a vertical envelopment are similar to those of an encirclement. Both the double encirclement and vertical envelopment are addressed here because, as this study will show, they played a key role in the options available to the operational commanders at Falaise and the Ruhr.

III. A Model for Analysis: Military Misfortune

> Military Misfortune: "Failures attributable neither to gross disproportions in odds nor to egregious incompetence on the part of the victim nor yet to extraordinary skill on the part of the victor."[22]

From their analysis of operational failures, Eliot Cohen and John Gooch derived the above definition of military misfortune. In addition, their analysis reveals that military defeat is not always "cut and dried." On the contrary, defeat and victory are not the only outcomes of any particular battle or campaign. In reality, the middle ground between victory and defeat includes the realm of "missed opportunities."[23] Accordingly, the idea of military misfortune includes not only

those battles ending in total defeat, but also those battles not won because of missed opportunities. Because decisive victory has often eluded operational commanders who failed to recognize or capitalize on opportunities, Cohen and Gooche's model for analyzing military misfortune provides an appropriate model for examining the dynamics of operational encirclement.

A key assumption in the methodology is no one commander can be justly awarded *all* the blame for any true military misfortune. Conversely, military misfortunes are organizational failures not merely individual failures.[24] In short, "the most prevalent characteristic of military misfortune is the failure of one party to do what might have been reasonably expected of it, and wide spread shock at the outcome once the true scale of the lost opportunity becomes known."[25]

Since Cohen and Gooche's model will be used to analyze the first "misfortune" at Falaise and adapted for use in analyzing the "success" at the Ruhr, it is important to first outline the process. The model is a five step process for mapping out military misfortune. The first step is to identify the failure and its consequences. The second step establishes what happened. The third step is to conduct a layered analysis at each command level involved in the operation. The fourth step then graphically portrays layers of command and critical tasks in a "matrix of failure." Finally, the fifth step identifies the path within the matrix along which military misfortune has

developed.[26] It is important to note the analysis does not seek *who* is to blame for the failure, but rather why the failure occurred. Without denying the importance of command responsibility, individual blame is left aside by assuming none of the key participants were outright incompetent. By focusing on the larger issues, the model is a means for determining the *cause* of the failure.

Finally, the ability to seize an opportunity implies unforeseen circumstances have arisen and some action must be taken to capitalize on them. In assessing whether to continue pursuit of operational encirclement, commanders must continually assess the situation and adapt to changes. In military terms, "adapting" is defined as identifying and taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by enemy actions or by chance combinations of circumstances to win success or to stave off failure.[27] It follows that adaptive failure is the inability to identify and take full advantage of opportunities whereas adaptive success does. Accordingly, the following analysis focuses on adaptive failure at Falaise and adaptive success in the Ruhr to provide the framework necessary for examining the dynamics of operational encirclement

Examining the Falaise Gap and the Ruhr Pocket together offer an added benefit. Both operations were conducted within the scope of the allied campaign to liberate Northwest Europe from the control of Nazis Germany. In this context, both operations included many of the same major units and commanders. As such,

it provides an ideal example of how to learn from previous mistakes in order to ensure success in later endeavors.

IV. Adaptive Failure

Lost Opportunity at Falaise

August 1944

Step One - Failure Defined. On 6 June 1944, Allied forces entered the continent of Europe to "undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces."[28] The campaign which followed in Normandy would inevitably decide the outcome of the war in the west. But victory was not always assured. Soon after establishing a secure bridgehead, allied plans for a quick build-up and breakout from the lodgement area bogged down in the heavily defended Bocage confronting the Americans in the western zone and the Panzer laden positions facing the British in the eastern zone.

Falling behind time-lines established long before the actual invasion, senior Allied commanders wrestled with how to break the stalemate that threatened a return of the static warfare experienced during World War I. After weeks of savage fighting, 21st Army Group launched a series of major operations which would eventually break the stalemate and lead to the destruction of the German Army. Although initially hampered by stiff enemy resistance, American forces in the First U.S. Army zone of

attack broke out of the Normandy lodgement area on 26 July and exploited their tactical success by moving quickly to seize key port facilities on the Brittany Peninsula.[29] During the exploitation phase of Operation Cobra, the enemy situation changed radically and the allies were presented with what General Omar Bradley proclaimed as an "opportunity that comes to a commander not more than once in a century...to destroy an entire hostile army."[30] The ensuing battle around Falaise and the failure to encircle and destroy the trapped German 5th and 7th Armies "provides one of the most striking examples in modern history of the failure of an organization to seize and secure a success that looked to be there for the taking."[31]

The lost opportunity not only had operational implications but strategic implications as well, for it was the single greatest opportunity to win quickly and decisively in the west. The encirclement of the German Armies in the Falaise Pocket would have come soon after the assassination attempt on Hitler and would have been followed by the liberation of Paris one week later. The combination of these three major events--the assassination attempt, the destruction of the 5th and 7th Armies, and the liberation of Paris--would have been militarily and politically too great to overcome and may very well have led to an earlier collapse of German resistance in the west.[32] And so the failure to close the gap at Falaise and entrap the German Armies gave Hitler some respite from the almost catastrophic events in August. As long as any part of both

Armies survived the fiasco, Hitler could hide the extent of the disaster and continue fighting in the West.

Step Two - What Happened. The following is a "battle summary" of the events leading to Falaise. It is not meant to be the definitive story of the Normandy Campaign, but rather a framework for further analysis of the decisions impacting the failure at Falaise.

After the initial success at securing the beachhead and a portion of the lodgement area, the Allies faced the problem of breaking out of the perimeter. As previously stated, the First U.S. Army's success at penetrating the German defenses during Operation Cobra provided the start point for the breakout and pursuit across France. As American forces poured through the hole in the German defenses, they adhered strictly to the scheme of maneuver laid out in the original Overlord plans and raced towards the key communications center of Avranches[33] At the base of the Brittany Peninsula, Avranches was a major pivot of maneuver for the Allies. To the west lay the strategically significant ports necessary for continued build-up and logistical support, to the south allied forces were poised to land along the southern French coast, and to the east lay the disorganized forces of the German 5th and 7th Armies.

Keeping with the original Overlord plans, the newly constituted Third U.S. Army turned to the west and began pushing onto the Brittany Peninsula. The scarcity of enemy resistance

and the realization the breakout had in fact enveloped the German left flank quickly led to a major change to the operational plan.[34] Responsibility for capturing the Brittany ports would become a single corps operation and the remaining forces under Third U.S. Army would reel to the east and continue pursuit of the German forces to the east.

The new concept of the operation called for a deep envelopment of German forces. By swinging their right wing toward the Seine, the Allies would force the Germans back against the lower part of the river where all of the bridges had been destroyed by Allied air power. With their escape routes cut off, the bulk of German armies would be encircled and face annihilation. In effect, the allies would gain control of the original lodgement area through the destruction of the German forces occupying it. The plan directed Patton's Third U.S. Army to sweep around the German left flank on a line Laval - Le Mans as the first stage of the large envelopment of German forces.

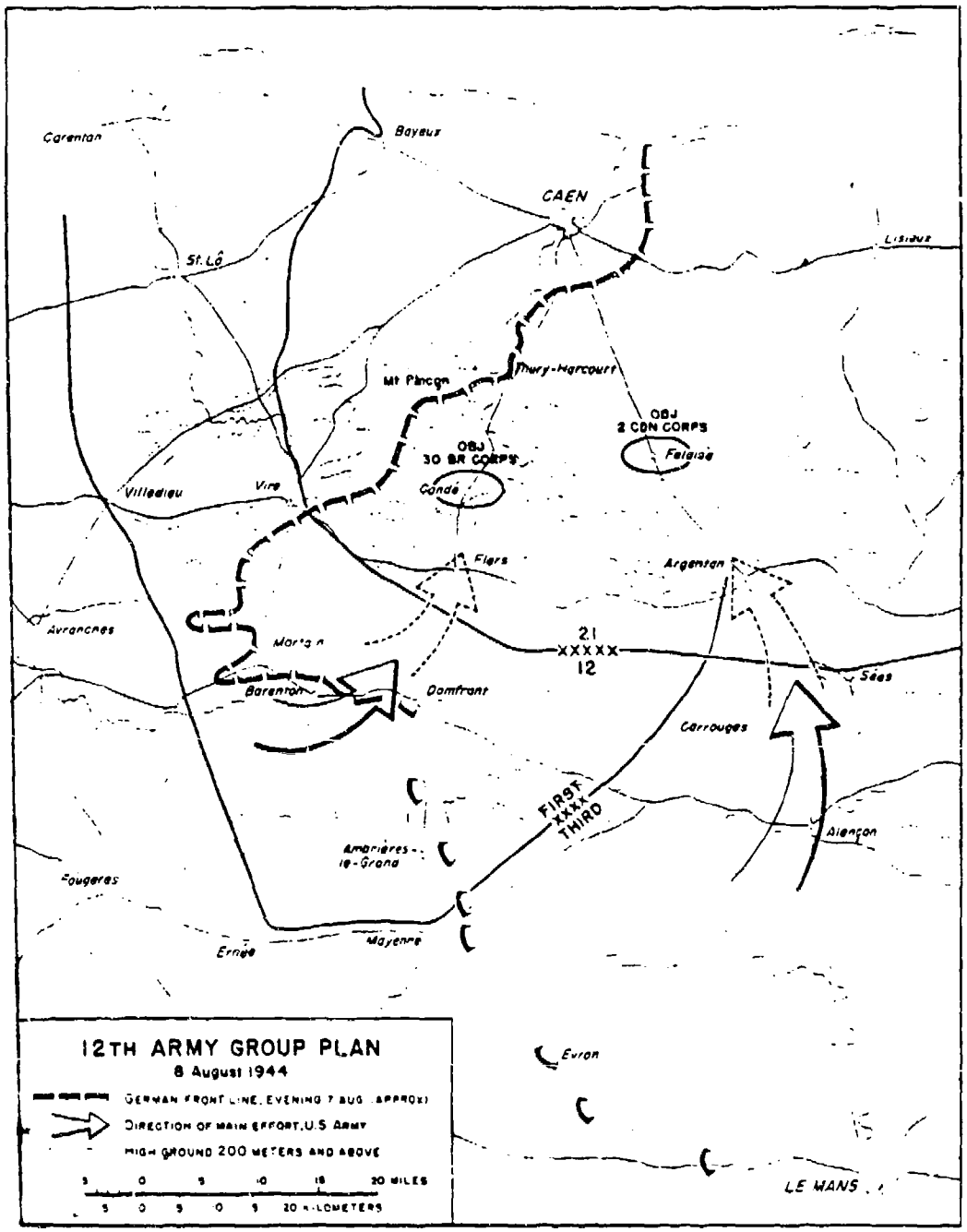
In conjunction with this maneuver by the Allied right wing, the 21st Army Group Commander, General Montgomery, directed the First Canadian Army on the Allied left wing to attack due south on a line Caen - Falaise to interdict the movement of the German forces and make withdrawal difficult if not impossible.[35] In the center of the Allied formation, the British Second Army was to conduct a complimentary attack from the vicinity of Caumont towards Argentan to maintain pressure on the German forces and

to prevent them from reinforcing their flanks and rear against pressure from the Third U.S Army and the First Canadian Army. Sensing the urgency required, Montgomery ordered the Canadians to attack as early as possible but not later than 8 August. This was the general concept for a wide encirclement of enemy forces short of the Seine river.

The newly formulated plan was based on the premise that German forces would do the only logical thing open to them which was to attempt a withdrawal to the Seine and to establish another line of defense. The Germans, however, had plans of their own. Sensing that their chances of success in the West were quickly disappearing, the Germans planned and executed a counterattack aimed at recapturing Avranches, cutting off the forces already through the penetration, and reestablishing a new continuous front to contain the Allies.[36]

On August 7th, the Germans launched their counterattack. Although the counterattack penetrated the VII Corps sector in the vicinity of Mortain, the German thrust towards Avranches was quickly blunted by tenacious ground units and the effective employment of Allied air power. Nonetheless, the unexpected maneuver had the effect of pushing large amounts of German forces into a pocket formed by elements of the Third U.S. Army, the First U.S Army, the Second British Army, and the First Canadian Army.[37]

Based on this drastic change in situation, Bradley conceptualized a new plan which would shorten the scale of the planned encirclement (Map 4-1, page 16). Since the XV Corps had

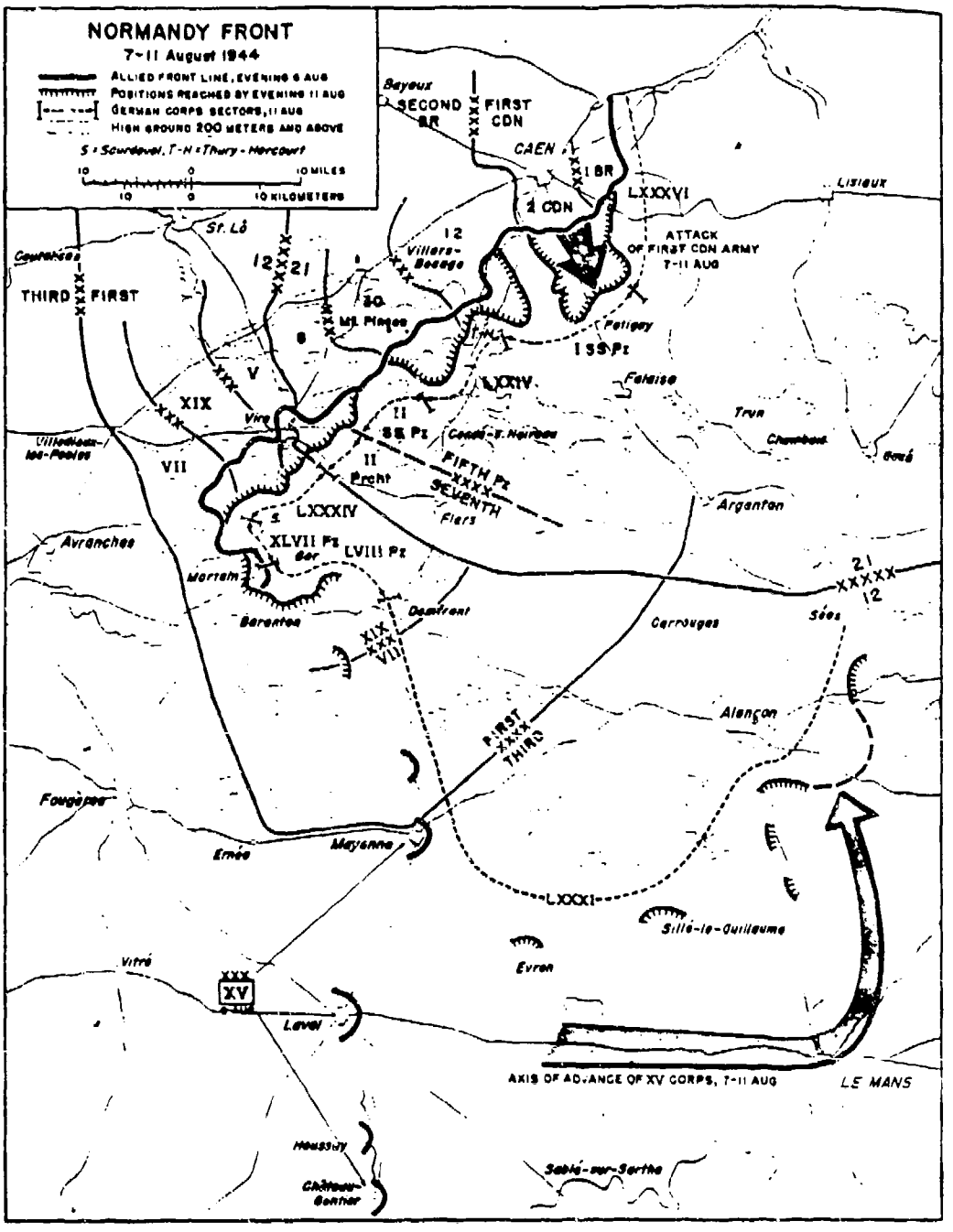


Map 4-1

Source: Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 493

already captured Laval and was nearing its second objective at Le Mans, it was in an ideal position to turn its axis of advance due north at Le Mans and attack towards Alencon. With Alencon under American control, there would be only 35 miles separating the XV Corps and the Canadians in Falaise. Since the Canadians had already received orders to attack Falaise based on the previous plan for a deep encirclement, the new plan seemed even more plausible Furthermore, if both forces continued their attacks beyond Falaise and Alencon for a link-up at Argentan, then the German armies would be completely encircled. Accordingly, the plan for a deep encirclement was adapted in favor of a short encirclement.[38]

From this point, events unfolded rapidly. Although the Canadian attacked began as planned on the 8 August, by the 9th it had completely bogged down (Map 4-2, page 18). Conversely, the U.S. XV Corps advanced rapidly to seize Le Mans and reoriented its advance towards Alencon to the north the same day. Meanwhile General Montgomery concluded that the Germans would not conduct a counter-encirclement from the west, but rather they would attempt to break out of the closing trap with units within the pocket.[39] Furthermore, the German line of withdrawal from the pocket would be in the Alencon-Argentan area because of the more defensible terrain necessary for holding open escape routes. Montgomery therefore drew the army group boundary south of Argentan because he felt the Canadians would encounter less resistance and would therefore be capable of seizing Argentan soonest.[40]



Map 4-2

Source: Blumenson, Breakout and Pursuit, p. 496

By 12 August, Haislip's XV Corps had secured Alencon and was preparing for a continued assault to reach the army group boundary south of Argentan. In ordering XV Corps' attack, Patton directed Haislip to prepare for a further advance beyond the Army Group boundary. Consequently, Haislip designated Argentan as the corps objective.[41]

As the XV Corps advanced to its last objective short of Argentan, Haislip requested additional forces and permission to continue his advance to seize Argentan. Patton told Haislip to continue the corps attack through Argentan and to push on towards Falaise.[42] By 13 August, however, heavy enemy resistance had slowed XV Corps' advance short of Argentan. As Haislip worked to overcome the enemy resistance, he received a startling message from Third U.S. Army Headquarters. Haislip was to halt XV Corps in place and wait for a link-up with the Canadians still attempting to continue their advance south. By now, the American and Canadian forces were separated by less than 25 miles. Between them, however, the major east-west avenues through Argentan and Falaise remained open.[43]

At this point, all of the major decisions impacting the final outcome had been made and the rapid advance of the Third U.S. Army ground to a halt. The opportunity for total encirclement of the German 5th and 7th Armies was now lost. Before the gap could be closed on the 19 August, most of the trapped German forces would escape. More importantly, those that did escape included many of the irreplaceable panzer units.

Step Three - Layered Analysis: Having identified what happened, the examination now looks at critical tasks left undone or poorly accomplished. The following layered analysis includes those levels of command which most directly influenced the operational decisions leading to the missed opportunity at Falaise. Accordingly, command levels from SHAEF to XV Corps will be analyzed.

Numerous charges and counter-charges for the blame accompanied the military misfortune at Falaise, but as stated earlier, no one individual can rightfully shoulder the entire responsibility. On the contrary, it is a shared responsibility between numerous commanders and their staffs. More specifically, it appears that organizational failure to accomplish three critical tasks contributed most to the failure at Falaise. These failed tasks include the development of a complete campaign plan, poor command and control, and the inability to properly read the events on the battlefield.

From its inception, the Normandy campaign lacked a clear operational design, a flaw which would directly impact the events at Falaise. Although the Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (COSSAC) was tasked with planning the invasion and follow-on operations, the shear enormity and difficulty of the invasion focused much of the planners' efforts on the initial assault to seize a beachhead. Unlike previous amphibious operations conducted in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, the sheer size of the Normandy invasion presented problems not previously encountered. Consequently short thrift

was given to the second part of the original planners' task: to develop a scheme for striking a vital blow at the heart of Germany with a force of 100 divisions. As the Chief planner Lieutenant General F. E. Morgan (COSSAC) would later admit, the planners were not even provided an endstate towards which to plan. Although he was told to aim his operations at Berlin, he received no definitive objective nor did he receive a projected post-war map of Europe as a frame of reference to guide his planning.[44]

Consequently, the plan developed by COSSAC focused almost solely on Overlord - the operation to mount an assault to secure a lodgement on the continent from which further offensive operations could be developed.[45] In its final form, the Overlord plan delineated five phases: the preliminary phase, the preparatory phase, the assault, the expansion of the beachhead, and the securing of the lodgement. Although logical in its sequence, the design failed in one major aspect - it was focused on seizing and controlling terrain oriented objectives, the ports. Not until follow-on operations did the German forces become the aim of operations. More so than any other factor, this set the stage for the events which unfolded during the execution of Overlord and subsequent operations.

In following the SHAEF directive, 21st Army Group also focused on securing an adequate lodgement area prior to pursuing the destruction of German forces. Again, the assault phase of the operation remained the main effort with emphasis on the seizure of port facilities as the purpose of follow-on

missions. This helps to explain why the purpose of Bradley's plan for the breakout at St Lo was to enlarge the lodgement area by securing key ports on the Brittany Peninsula.

Within Bradley's plan, the failure to appropriately identify Avranches as a key pivot of maneuver where 12th Army Group could react to the realities of the situation cost the Allies dearly in time and resources. Although the plan was changed to adapt to the enemy situation, it was not until the critical element of time had been lost and limited resources committed to the Brittany effort. By remaining hidebound and unwilling to reassess the plan, Allied commanders lost an opportunity to redirect their resources at a key moment and point during the campaign. Consequently, once the new plan for a short envelopment had been implemented, forces necessary to secure flanks and to continue the advance from the south at Alencon towards . tan had already been committed on the Brittany Peninsula and were too far away to impact the new plan. In essence, the focus on terrain oriented objectives in the SHAEF and subordinate army group and field army plans drove operations during the execution phase to orient more on logistical aspects rather than on achieving conditions necessary for decisive operations. This orientation distracted commanders and staffs during a crucial moment in the campaign and planted the seeds for the ensuing military misfortune.

The inadequacies of the command and control infrastructure constitute a second critical failure in the missed opportunity at Falaise. From the highest levels at SHAEF down to the corps

level, problems with command and control permeated the allied command structure. At the theater army level, Eisenhower's problems with command and control were mostly personality driven. Much of his focus was on appeasing two senior commanders who were less than candid with each other under even the best circumstances. Complicating the situation, 12th Army Group was activated just after the breakout at St Lo on 1 August creating a situation where one army group commander was commanding and directing the operations of another army group. Since SHAEF Headquarters had not yet established a forward headquarters on the continent, Montgomery remained the commander of all ground forces to include Bradley's 12th Army Group. The new command structure proved cumbersome during critical stages of the campaign.

Complicating the situation further, the Third U.S. Army and First Canadian Army were also newly activated thus creating a situation where new commanders and staffs were not only groping with how to fit into an immature command structure but also with fighting a complex battle as well. During the crucial days when the Allies' opportunity for decisive action hung in the balance, these factors would play a key role. The trail of command and control failures is easily traced during the critical stages of the campaign and are laid out in the matrix of failure.

Finally, the inability of senior commanders to properly read events on the battlefield created a false impression that the chance for decisive results had passed when in fact the

conditions still existed. This failure at 21st Army Group left Montgomery and his staff believing that German resistance facing the First Canadian Army would collapse and that no shift in the army group boundary was necessary. Likewise, the 12th Army Group read of the battlefield was the bulk of the German forces had already escaped and that there was no urgency required in closing the trap on remnants. As events proved, both "reads" were grossly inaccurate. Consequently, Third U.S. Army was not only directed to hold in place, but was also directed to relieve the XV Corps at Alencon and have it continue the drive to the east. The resulting confusion over whether Patton's provisionally constituted corps under Major General Gaffey or the V Corps under Major General Gerow would lead the effort at Falaise created an even greater loss in time. On the Canadian front, an over optimistic read and the consequent reports to 21st Army Group supported Montgomery's decision not to change the main effort from the Canadians in the north to the Americans in the south.

Step Four - Matrix of Failure: At each level, these critical failures combined to create the conditions which resulted in the missed opportunity at Falaise. Figure 4-1 graphically portrays the problem.

Critical Task / Cmd Level	Development of Campaign Plan	Command and Control	Read the Battlefield
SHAEF	Initial COSSAC plan focused on ports vs. enemy force.	Fails to provide adequate cmd over Army Group Cdrs who are less than candid.	Does not interpret ULTRA accurately and fails to pass info to lower HQs.
21st Army Group	Totally focused on assault phase and seizure of lodgement.	Denies Third Army permission to cross Army Group boundary.	Underestimates German strength in 1st Cn zone.
12th Army Group	Purpose of Cobra: to breakout and gain ports/increase lodgement.	Issues "Hold in Place" order to XV Corps.	Intell estimates put bulk of German forces outside of pocket while most are in fact still trapped.
Third (US) Army	Adapts rapidly to changes in situation. XV Corps rapidly reoriented.	Activates provisional corps HQ and relieves XV Corps of Argentan zone.	Same Intell "read" as 12 AG leads Cdr to push for discontinuation of atk in favor of a deeper envelopment.
First (CN) Army	No major changes from original orders.	Combination of "green" HQs and DIVs creates conditions for lackluster attack.	Optimistic reporting convinces 21 AG Cdr to continue support of Canadians as the main effort.
XV Corps	Understands Third Army intent & sets Obj as Argentan.	Loss of C2 over 2d Fr Div during atk on Argentan gives enemy time to regroup.	Senses increased pressure on corps left flank. Holds and asks for more forces for continued advance.

FIGURE 4-1. Matrix of Failure

Step Five - Pathway to Misfortune: As graphically portrayed in the matrix of failure, the pathway to misfortune at Falaise begins in the development of the original campaign plan. From the initial SHAEF guidance to the operational plan for the breakout at St Lo, the focus remained on logistical support of the army versus destruction of German forces - the condition necessary for a quick and decisive campaign. Consequently, as the situation developed after the breakout, forces were committed towards an operational objective that had been altered by the enemy situation. Although new plans were developed, they were not executed until after precious resources had been committed to the Brittany Peninsula. Even once the new plan had been implemented, inadequacies in the command and control infrastructure at theater, army group, and field army level retarded the efforts of subordinate units to accomplish the mission. Contributing to the already confused command arrangements, failure to interpret and read battlefield intelligence resulted in poor decisions by army group and army commanders.

As the critical path indicates, deficiencies in campaign planning and an inability to read battlefield events impacted command and control which ultimately is the path along which failure develops. As a result, the allied forces were unable to achieve operational encirclement. And so, as German forces escaped through the Falaise Gap, so did the chances for a quick and decisive campaign in the West.

V. Adaptive Success

Encirclement of the Ruhr

March 1945

The following case study is a modification of the Cohen and Gooch model for examining military misfortune. It follows the same five-step process; however, it seeks to determine why the operation succeeded in lieu of determining the cause of failure.

Step One - Success Defined: On 7 March 1945, elements of the First U.S. Army seized a bridge crossing over the Rhine at Remagen. Similar to the effect of the COBRA breakout, the unexpected capture of the Ludendorff bridge created conditions which impacted earlier operational plans. Although previous plans included the link-up of allied forces in an operational encirclement of German forces in the Ruhr by 21st and 12th Army Groups, the rapidly developing situation provided an opportunity to increase the tempo and complete the destruction of a larger number of enemy forces and resources before they could be withdrawn to fight in the interior of Germany.

General Eisenhower and his senior commanders quickly recognized the opportunity presented by the *coups de theatre* that capturing the bridge represented. However, the opportunities presented were not without risk. With General Montgomery poised to conduct a deliberate crossing of the Rhine at Wesel, exploitation of the hasty crossing would divert

limited resources away from the main effort in the 21st Army Group zone. Additionally, changing the operation may unhinge the planned river crossing in 21st Army Groups zone. Consequently, this dilemma hampered the initial build-up and operational exploitation of tactical success at Remagen. In fact, initial operations were highly restricted and First U.S. Army elements were limited to advancing a mere 1,000 yards per day.[46]

By 19 March, however, General Courtney Hodges' First U.S. Army was firmly established on the east bank of the Rhine and in position to break out and exploit. With General Eisenhower's approval, Bradley authorized Hodges to expand the Remagen bridgehead to a limit of nine divisions and to be prepared from 23 March on to attack in conjunction with the 21st Army Group crossing for an eventual link-up and encirclement of German forces in the Ruhr.[47]

When the First U.S. Army did attack on 25 March 1945, a new war of maneuver as spectacular as the Third U.S. Army drive across France in the fall of 1944 ensued.[48] However, this time senior commanders would not miss their opportunity. With memories of the Falaise Gap still fresh in their minds, U.S. commanders would not allow German combat forces another chance to escape. This time, they would overcome uncertainty and friction and adapt their plan to ensure the total encirclement and destruction of enemy forces in the Ruhr Pocket.

Although there was no doubt at this point that the Allies would win the war, the successful encirclement of the Ruhr

directly impacted the early collapse of the German Army. Not only did the encirclement eliminate 300,000 German troops from combat, it also denied the rest of Germany the industrial resources of the Ruhr and "thereby dealt a death blow to German ability and will to resist.[49] Additionally, it created the conditions for a subsequent two-pronged allied advance with one wing cutting the Germans from the sea and the second driving towards Berlin for a link-up with the Russians.[50] Finally, the encirclement cut off V-Bomb sites from their supply of missiles and accomplished the final total destruction of the German Air Force.[51]

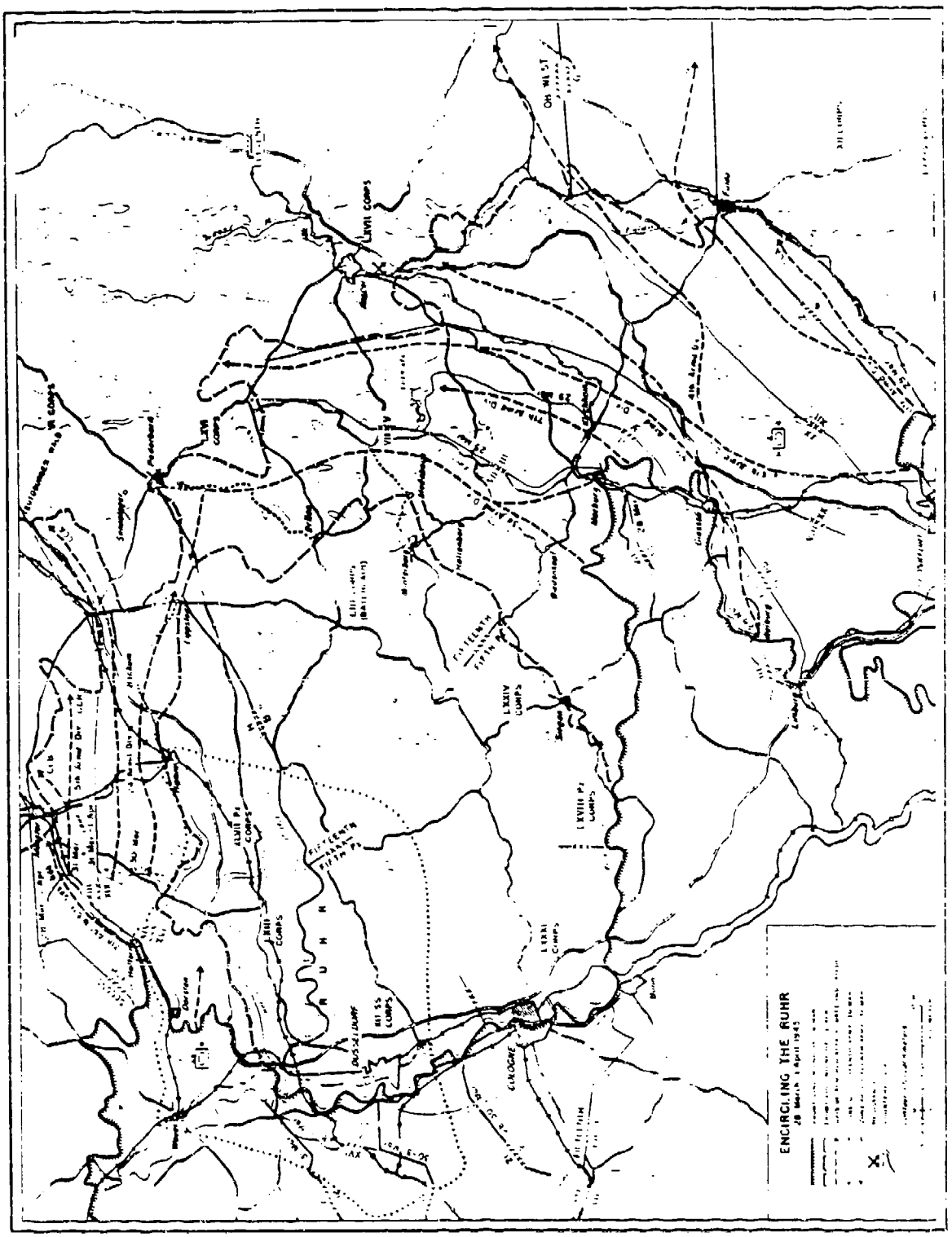
Step Two - What Happened: The following "battle summary" serves to provide a basis for analyzing how and why U.S. commanders adapted their initial plans to ensure link-up and total encirclement of German forces.

When First U.S. Army commenced its attack with 21st Army's Rhine crossing on 25 March, allied commanders were once again faced with the risks associated with a convergent attack. With 21st Army Group's 9th U.S. Army and 12th Army Group's First U.S. Army driving to link-up at the predesignated juncture at Paderborn, the dilemmas facing Army and Army Group commanders were nearly identical as those faced the previous fall in the failed attempt to encircle enemy forces at Falaise. The lessons learned in the fall would have a drastic impact on this operation.

12th Army Group's final plan for the breakout from Remagen and the encirclement of the Ruhr reflected the intent of Generals Eisenhower and Bradley.[52] Hodges' First U.S. Army and Patton's Third U.S. Army would first create a bridgehead ninety-two miles wide and then attack astride the Lahn River northeast towards Kassel.[53] First U.S. Army would then wheel to the north and form the right wing of a double envelopment of the Ruhr.[54]

Leading the First U.S. Army breakout from Remagen, General J. Lawton Collins' VII Corps once again constituted the 12th Army Group's main effort. Poised at the northern rim of the Remagen bridgehead, the corps was in ideal position to lead First Army's thrust towards eventual link-up with Ninth U.S Army. On 25 March, Hodges' launched his attack with five infantry and two armored divisions towards initial objectives forty-five miles east of the Rhine (Map 5-1, page 31).[55] For his part, General Collins conducted an intricate maneuver to hold a portion of his original defensive sector with one division while attacking northward with another division to protect his northern flank. Simultaneously, the 3d Armored Division passed through a third division to begin its attack towards Kassel. Although German resistance was initially stiff, the 3d Armored Division soon overwhelmed the enemy and by the morning of 26 March was racing eastward.[56]

By the morning of 28 March, VII Corps had made unprecedented gains and had seized the town of Marburg. Sensing the time was right, General Bradley redrew the army boundaries and directed



Map 5-1

Source: MacDonald, The Last Offensive

First U.S Army towards Paderborn and link-up with 21st Army Group's Ninth U.S. Army while orienting Third U.S. Army on Kassel to protect Hodges right flank.[57] The newly formed Fifteenth U.S. Army would assume responsibility for the west bank of the Rhine and free up the remainder of First U.S. Army's divisions for employment along the inner circle facing the developing pocket. Additionally, General Bradley made a major decision and opted *not* to employ the First Allied Airborne Army as a part of his operation.[58] The stage was now set for the final phase - pursuit towards Paderborn and link-up with 21st Army Group.

With great urgency, VII Corps now raced towards its new objective at Paderborn. All action to date indicated the advance would succeed in making its objective and meet First U.S Army's objective for the encirclement. However, as the lead task force of the 3d Armored Division approached its objective, it began to meet fierce resistance and by the morning of 30 March the complexion of the operation changed entirely.[59] A hastily organized enemy force comprised of over sixty Tiger and Panther tanks and students from the SS panzer reconnaissance training center had established a strong defensive line between 3d Armored Division and its final objective at Paderborn[60] At this point, it appeared to Collins that German forces were attempting to hold open the shoulders of their escape route out of the Ruhr.

As German resistance stiffened in front of Collins' VII Corps, Allied forces constituting the left wing of the double

envelopment were also facing problems. Since 28 March, elements of Simpson's Ninth Army had made significant gains towards the link-up point at Paderborn However, lead elements had been faced with a formidable task of attacking over marshy terrain and against deadly positions comprised of antiaircraft in concrete emplacements and were beginning to lose momentum.[61]

Sensing the urgency of the moment, Collins did the unprecedented. Disregarding formal command lines, Collins contacted Simpson directly and urged a change to the current plan. Instead of Paderborn, Collins suggested shortening the planned encirclement and linking up at Lippstadt - twenty-five miles east of Paderborn. In other words, Collins wanted to shorten the scale of the encirclement to ensure that it was in fact accomplished. Simpson agreed and shifted the 2d Armored Division from a drive towards Beckum directly to Lippstadt. Collins had made an unprecedented move by skipping over First U.S. Army, 12th Army Group, SHAEF, and 21st Army Group to talk to Simpson. Simpson's response was equally significant for he changed the axis of the 21st Army Group attack without first consulting Montgomery.[62]

The results were decisive. By noon on 1 April, elements of 2d and 3d Armored Divisions had linked up and completed the encirclement of the Ruhr. Trapped in the pocket measuring 30 by 75 miles were the headquarters and assigned troops of Army Group B, all of the Fifth Panzer Army, the majority of the Fifteenth Army, and two corps of the First Parachute Army. In

total, 7 corps and 19 divisions were trapped by the encirclement. First estimates put the force at 150,000. When the final count was tallied, over 300,000 German soldiers and their equipment had been trapped and the fate of the German Army secured.[63]

Step Three - Layered Analysis: In assessing the success the Allied Forces garnered in the encirclement of the Ruhr, it is important to first dispel any notion that the operation was the result of little or no German resistance. A comparison of casualties during the exploitation in France in August with the casualties suffered during the Ruhr encirclement provides some insights. From activation on 1 August through the Battle of the Falaise Gap to 31 August, Third U.S. Army suffered 2,492 killed, 11,705 wounded, and 2,111 missing.[64] By comparison, First U.S. Army suffered 2,834 killed, 12,290 wounded, and 887 missing during the period 1 March 1945 through 31 March 1945 when it crossed the Rhine, established a bridgehead, and completed the encirclement. The number of killed and wounded are remarkably equal and is testimony to the intensity of the fighting encountered by Allied Forces conducting the Ruhr operation.[65]

Success in the Ruhr encirclement, then, was the result of organizational capabilities of the Allies rather than the inabilities of the enemy to adequately defend against the operation. Unlike the failed encirclement at Falaise, operations in the Ruhr were characterized by efficiency and

decisive action. Many factors contributed to the successful entrapment of over 300,000 Germans in the Ruhr pocket. For the sake of comparison and analysis, the same three critical tasks which proved so difficult to achieve at Falaise will be analyzed as principle reasons for success in the Ruhr. In the case of the Ruhr, the three critical tasks that Allied commanders skillfully accomplished include the development of a flexible campaign plan, establishment of firm command and control, and accurate reads of the battlefield.

As late as 20 January 1945, General Eisenhower and SHAEF Headquarters had not decided upon the scheme of maneuver for the envelopment of the Ruhr. Instead, senior commanders and staffs were watching and assessing the rapidly developing situation during the approach march of Allied Forces towards the Rhine. This time, however, the intent of the operation was clear - to cut off and encircle German forces east of the Rhine River line in the vicinity of Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr.

Although thorough plans were in fact laid, the seizure of the Ludendorff bridge at Remagen radically changed the situation and forced the first major decision.[66] With a bridge now across the Rhine in the 12th Army Group zone, the issue now was whether to exploit the opportunity or adhere to the original scheme with 21st Army Group as the main effort. Several considerations complicated the problem. First, the unexpected crossing had caused the Germans to commit reserves in the area of Remagen thus weakening the defense expected in the 21st

Army Group zone. Second, although it was desirable to further exploit the tactical success and impact German morale, terrain across from the crossing site was cross compartmentalized and created tough conditions for rapid movement. Finally, a change would greatly impact the logistical plan already being implemented. Weighing all considerations, Eisenhower chose to shift the main effort from 21st Army Group to 12th Army Group. Although this was a major shift, flexibility in the original plan allowed for the quick incorporation of changes. On 9 March, Bradley reacted quickly and directed First U.S. Army to reinforce the Remagen bridgehead and prepare for further operations in coordination with 21st Army Group's assault across the Rhine.

From the initial planning stages, the plan for the Ruhr had one purpose: to encircle and destroy enemy forces. This more than any other factor created the conditions which enabled subordinate commanders the flexibility in planning and execution which led to actual encirclement and decisive results. From army commander down to task force commanders, no doubt existed concerning the required endstate. As the changing enemy situation jeopardized achieving this endstate, this clear vision provided the impetus to commanders to act decisively and adapt their own plans accordingly. In addition to a flexible campaign plan, the development of a mature and clearly identifiable command and control infrastructure contributed significantly to the final outcome. Unlike the armies in the

field at Falaise, the armies facing the Rhine in early 1945 were a well coordinated, experienced, and mature force. With the exception of the newly formed Fifteenth U.S. Army, all attacking forces had fought through France and up to the German frontier. And although Fifteenth U.S. Army was newly formed, it was used as an enabling force along the west bank of the Rhine River to free up seasoned divisions for the exploitation and encirclement. Most importantly, senior commanders and staffs had established firm ties with their higher headquarters and were familiar with personalities and procedures. This command situation was radically improved from the newly formed American and Canadian Armies constituting the wings of the attempted encirclement at Falaise. This environment directly contributed to a command climate which allowed subordinate commanders the latitude to exercise initiative in adapting their own plans.

During the execution phase of the encirclement, this climate proved essential. As evidenced by the actions of Generals Collins and Simpson, key leaders capitalized on this environment to achieve the desired endstate. Understanding that the encirclement of the German forces was the desired endstate gave Collins the latitude to change the designated link-up from Paderborn to Lippstadt. Likewise, Simpson was able to shift the axis of his advance on the Allied left wing to Lippstadt because he also knew the desired endstate. The ability to communicate cross boundaries allowed the coordination and enabled the execution of required changes. Flexibility of mind,

the agility of committed forces, and the ability to communicate across the army group boundaries were all key factors in adapting to the rapidly changing situation and were all a result of an efficient and well established command and control infrastructure.

Just as important, the ability for commanders and staffs to properly read the battlefield and to anticipate events enabled the allies to adjust rapidly, keep the enemy off balance, and complete the encirclement. Drawing on hard learned experience from the Falaise failure, senior commanders were well attuned to the changing conditions on the battlefield and were quick to exploit opportunities before they disappeared. Prior to First U.S. Army's breakout from the Remagen bridgehead, Hodges sensed that a drive directly north towards the link-up point at Paderborn would push VII Corps into the strength of German defenses and into an area enemy commanders expected Hodges to attack. Against Collins' recommendation, he directed the First U.S. Army to attack first due east towards Marburg to avoid strength and to deceive enemy commanders of his intentions. Similarly, Collins read the mounting pressure forward of his axis of advance on Paderborn and adjusted by shifting his axis towards Lippstadt. In either case, an inability to properly read the existing conditions may have precluded ground forces from achieving a link-up and obtaining the decisive results of total encirclement.

Step Four - Matrix of Success: The ability to successfully accomplish each of the critical tasks at every level of command contributed significantly to the successful encirclement of the Ruhr. Figure 5-2 graphically displays the key events at each level for each critical task.

Step Five - Pathway to Success: Ultimate success in the Ruhr was a combination of several factors. First, focusing on enemy forces as the center of gravity and not on seizing a particular geographic location provided flexibility in operations. From SHAEF down to corps level, this focus drove plans and operations and provided the basis for successful adaptation. From the outset, there was no doubt concerning the purpose of the operation or the desired endstate. Second, as events unfolded and the situation changed, commanders properly read and interpreted battlefield events and intelligence. Finally, the command and control infrastructure which had matured into an efficient system provided not only the latitude to adjust to the situation and to seize the initiative, but also the means to affect the changes through reliable communications.

Critical Task / Cmd Level	Developmentof Campaign Plan	Command and Control	Read the Battlefield
SHAEF	Final plans made after situation develops.	Establishes firm C2 over three Army Groups.	Sees opportunity to envelop forces in Ruhr.
21st Army Group	Detailed preparation holds up Wesel crossings.	Retains control over Ninth (US) Army.	Stays focused on Wesel crossings.
12th Army Group	Adapts to Remagen Bridge opportunity and modifies plan.	Employs Fifteenth Army as an enabling force.	Senses opportunity to shift First Army north at Marburg.
First (US) Army	Plans atk to avoid enemy strength. Atks east first.	Gives VII Corps Cdr mission order to accomplish link-up.	Deduces strong enemy psns N. of Remagen. Atks east first.
Ninth (US) Army	Plan supports operational maneuver of 21st Army Group.	Shifts axis towards Lippstadt.	Reads enemy situation in same way as VII Corps.
VII Corps	Conducts reliefs in place to allow mech units to pursue.	Exercises initiative and contacts Ninth Army directly.	Feels increased enemy pressure vic Paderborne.

FIGURE 5-1. Matrix of Success

VI. Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to examine the dynamics of operational encirclement and to determine what critical factors may impact success or failure in achieving decisive results. An analysis of the Falaise Gap and the Ruhr Pocket indicates that three critical tasks may significantly impact the outcome: the development and execution of a flexible campaign plan focused on the enemy's center of gravity, an efficient command and control infrastructure that allows subordinate commanders latitude in executing orders, and an ability to properly read battlefield events and act appropriately.

Based on these critical tasks, there are several planning considerations which should be weighed by commanders and staffs planning or conducting operational encirclement. First, operational commanders must orient campaigns and major operations on objectives that will produce the most decisive results. Operational plans must focus on enemy centers of gravity and must be flexible enough to adapt to rapidly changing situations. Sequencing of operations may be necessary to get at an enemy delaying or denying decisive engagement. However, commanders must not by hidebound to a phased operation and must be alert for opportunities to change or delete phases invalidated by battlefield events.[67] During the Normandy

campaign, senior commanders stuck to the original plan for Overlord too long and subsequently had units unavailable during the decisive stage of the campaign. The campaign plan for the encirclement of the Ruhr, on the other hand, established the endstate up front and adhered to it throughout the operation.

Second, once the attacker unhinges the enemy's defense, he must rapidly exploit the situation to ensure the continuity of the defense is not reestablished. This may require a shift in the main effort or a shift in the axis of advance to avoid enemy strengths. Fluid conditions favor the attacker and preclude the defender from regaining his balance.[68] Montgomery's failure at Falaise to shift the main effort from the Canadian to the American army presented an opportunity for the Germans to reestablish their defenses along the shoulders of the their escape routes and, in essence, set the conditions for the inevitable misfortune. Learning from this mistake, Collins recognized the same conditions as the German defenses stiffened outside of Paderborn along the shoulders of the developing encirclement. By shifting the axis of advance, Collins avoided the enemy's strength and effected a link-up and encirclement.

Third, although the force as a whole may be conducting an operational envelopment within a given theater, other major operations are conducted simultaneously to support the main effort.[69] At Falaise, the Second British Army conducted a frontal attack to fix enemy forces and to enable the left and

right wings to envelop German forces. During the encirclement of the Ruhr, the Third U.S Army attacked in zone to secure the First U.S. Army's right flank as it raced towards its link-up with Ninth U.S. Army. Meanwhile, Fifteenth U.S. Army assumed responsibility for the defense along the Rhine vacated by the attacking First U.S. Army.

Fourth, the initiative must be retained and is the number one priority for the attacker. Regardless of the form of maneuver, enough flexibility must be retained to provide the commander the freedom of action as the situation develops. Anticipation of battlefield events is not guesswork but rather it is a disciplined approach to managing information on the battlefield and planning and executing accordingly.[70] The loss of initiative at Falaise was the single greatest mistake. Bradley's reluctance to cross Army Group boundaries in essence stripped Third U.S Army of the initiative and forfeited it to the enemy. Conversely, Collins retained the initiative by changing the army group link-up point from Paderborn to Lippstadt. His action insured the Allies retained the initiative and he should be credited with much of the success the operation ultimately achieved.

Fifth, although large units may be committed to a particular type of operation, it must be physically postured to exploit unforeseen opportunities.[71] Besides losing the initiative, the second greatest failure at Falaise was a poor posturing of forces. At the key moment in the battle, forces diverted to the

initial objectives on the Brittany Peninsula were out of position and unavailable to weight XV Corps' attack towards Argentan. Conversely, VII Corps was in a position to shift its axis of advance towards Lippstadt without unduly exposing its flanks because of the posturing of divisions during its attack.

Finally, when facing a concentrated enemy, large unit commanders maneuver to force the enemy to fight at a disadvantage.[72] In essence, this implies a convergent attack against the enemy's flanks and rear. As a result of an enveloping attack, an operational encirclement may occur if the wings of the enveloping force are able to achieve a link-up. In this case, the results may prove decisive.

As events at Falaise and the Ruhr indicate, operational encirclement offers an opportunity for decisive results. However, as in the case of the failure at the Falaise Gap, certain critical tasks left undone may preclude operational success. On the other hand, the Ruhr Pocket suggests that the same tasks accomplished efficiently may in fact significantly contribute to successful encirclement. There is a direct correlation between these critical tasks and the dynamic characteristics which apply to offensive operations identified in today's emerging doctrine. FM 100-5, Operations, states that the ideal attack should allow for initiative on the part of subordinate commanders, rapid shifts in the main effort to take advantage of opportunities, momentum and tempo, and the deepest,

most rapid simultaneous destruction of enemy defenses possible.[73]

As the preceding analysis indicates, the success of an operational encirclement may depend on a commander and his staff's ability to incorporate these factors during planning and execution.

ENDNOTES

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[4]Ibid., 7-9.

[5]Ibid., 7-24.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., 7-28.

[8]Clausewitz, On War, 619.

[9]Christopher Bellamy, The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare (London and New York, Routledge, 1990), 18.

[10]Rick Gutwald, "The Effects of Operational Encirclement," (School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1987), 2.

[11]FM 100-5, Operations, 7-9.

[12]U.S. Army, FM 100-5-1, Operational Terms and Graphics, (Washington: 21 October 1985), 1-60.

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[18]Bellamy, The Future of Modern Land Warfare, 21.

[19]Ibid.

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[21]Ibid., 20.

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[24]Ibid., 3.

[25]Ibid., 139.

[26]Ibid., 46.

[27]Ibid., 161.

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[41]Ibid., 407.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., 408.

[44]H. Essame, The North-West Europe Campaign (Aldershot: Gale and Polden Limited, 1962), 12.

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[46]Charles B. MacDonald, The Last Offensive (Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1984), 233.

[47]Ibid., 234.

[48]Ibid., 235.

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[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]MacDonald, The Last Offensive, 344.

[53]Department of Military Art and Engineering, The War in Western Europe (United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 1952), 46.

[54]MacDonald, The Last Offensive, 344.

[55]Ibid., 346.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid., 351.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid., 352.

[60]Ibid., 354.

[61]Ibid., 358.

[62]Leo Kessler, The Battle of the Ruhr Pocket (Great

Britain: Scarborough House, 1990), 101.

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[67]FM 100-5, Operations, 7-27.

[68]Ibid.

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